

# Boquillas

by Jeffrey H. Simonson, 1993

Mornings are always cool. The *Sierra del Carmens* cast a massive shadow across to the west. Orange colors of the *Chisos* mountains greet us during sunrise, turning more and more yellow until the shadow crosses the *Rio Grande* and the sun peaks over the bluffs. This is a good time to work, before the heat forces everyone to seek shade.

But there is little work, so mostly we use this part of the day to rest. Of course someone must tend to the burros, and Juan has to feed his *remuda* of horses. The remainder of the town just waits.

We wait for the *touristas*. All of us in *Boquillas* depend on them. They supply our way of life. Without them we cannot live in a place so remote. Here we cannot grow crops, for the land is too high to be irrigated from the river as they do further up the *Rio Grande*.

So we wait for our income to come to us. We wait for the tourists visiting the Big Bend National Park to urge their automobiles and RVs up the short, steep road to visit Boquillas Canyon. Some just park at the overlook and stare across the *Rio Grande* to gawk at our village; others hike the trail into the dark narrow canyon surrounding the river.

By mid-morning *Boquillas* is awake. Each of us deciding it is better to do something now so we won't have to work during the blistering afternoon. I, too, can make my rounds. But mornings are not usually good, and I just get out to have something to do, and to find my *compadres* to plan the afternoon.

The younger ones like to comb the foothills for colored rocks they can sell to the visitors. They do not trust us Mexicans selling rocks, but they like to get good deals, and if you can find one of those sparkling blue rocks, someone will buy it--if you ask a high enough price to make it seem valuable.

Selling rocks is not for me. It was alright when I was young and immature, but I have grown. Besides, the rocks are hard to find and one might walk all day and find nothing.

It is work for children and there are better ways.

Pedro's boat brings him good money. Some tourists want to come in to see *Boquillas* up close. Pedro can get as much as two dollars to ferry them across. He can make lots of money if the day is good. But Pedro must spend all day by his boat, looking for customers.

I don't have time for that.

Today only Jefé will be coming with me. He is younger, but he is bright and learns quick. He is as brave as any other. In return for my great generosity, Jefé brings the plastic bags we will need. This saves me much effort, for walking to the park store to buy them might take up to an hour.

Juan's horses can make him a good living. Though he sometimes has trouble finding feed for them, they carry a much bigger load than the tiny burros. When one of the tourists wants to visit the mountains south of here, Juan is hired to take them into the *Sierra Fronterizas*; they are very remote and very high. No one lives in such a place without tourist money. It can sometimes even snow in those mountains and I do not like the cold. Juan spends as many as six hard weeks traveling the steep trails.

I could not take orders from tourists for that long.

This land has always supported travelers. Travelers passing through and travelers moving from spot to spot searching for food. The *Chihuahuan* desert is vast and dry, but there are many forests, full of animals, in the cool mountains. Villages were always small and separated by great distances. They foraged and grew what they could in places where water was within reach.

The Mescalero Apaches once ruled this whole region. During the spring, when food and water were easy to find, they would live comfortably in the mountains, gathering and hunting food to carry through the droughts. In late summer the Apaches, and the Comanche tribes too, lived not from the land, but from the land's people. People in villages like *Boquillas*. Their raids took them up through *Del Norte* Gap into the Trans-Pecos region, or south to Lake Jaco in *Chihuahua*. Their return from the south always brought them up the Great Comanche Trail, through *Paso de Chisos* and across the *Rio Grande*. Sometimes after crossing, they would pass through *Boquillas* and take what things they wanted. The villagers had no way to stop it. People in this land could always live off the others if the land failed to provide.

Jefé and I walk down to the bank of the *Rio Grande*. The short shadows offer no relief from the blazing sun. On the way, we see Pedro ferrying tourists; the complaints of the

burros under the heavy loads echo from the canyon walls. To get more money, the *touristas* are told it is a long hard walk up to town, but that we will, for only two dollars, take them on one of our fine *burros*. They always trusts us, and even after having returned from the short ride with their bottles of cheap Tequila and Kahlua, they still pay us.

Tugging stubborn *burros* in the afternoon sun is not for me.

After putting our clothes in the plastic bag, we swim the short distance across the slow-running river. We put back on our still-dry clothes and scramble up the bank. The dense reeds keep our movements hidden. Shortly we reach the parking lot for the park's Boquillas Canyon trail. Luck is with us today. Many more cars and RVs are parked here, and most people have left to hike into the canyon. This hottest part of the day is the best time. The hikers on this short trail don't know enough to come early or late in the day to avoid the heat. The temperature slows them down and they are gone for an hour or two.

One of the younger ones is sitting near the trail head sign with his rocks. He is alone and waiting for the hikers to return. They always feel sorry for anyone sitting under the baking sun after climbing into their air-conditioned motor homes. He will likely sell all of his sparkling blue rocks today.

Most cars are small and cheap--no good to us. But several RVs are parked near us, so we move toward them. I stand and watch while Jefé easily pops open the rear door of a Winnebago. He returns shortly with a full bag. Jefé has learned to move faster now and take only small valuables. We quickly move to another RV and again I look out for others.

We return to the *Rio Grande*, strip off our clothes, and swim back to Mexico. While dressing, I notice on a bluff across the river, someone watching through binoculars. At first I am nervous, but a feeling of elation and power floods through me. I have won. I have survived another forage. Holding up the bag of goods for him to see makes me feel triumphant.

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